

3.5 Viking longships

Whatever the reasons for Viking raids, developments in shipbuilding gave the Vikings an effective means by which to attack distant lands.

Technological developments

For centuries, Scandinavians sailed in craft that were essentially giant rowboats. Then, in the eighth century CE, they devised several innovations: a keel, a great woollen or linen sail and an oar used as a **rudder** for steering. With this new technology, they could make longer ocean voyages. It also gave them the means by which to attack lands a long way away.

In 1893, and again in 1998, a replica of the Gokstad ship (see [Source 1](#)) demonstrated how quickly such longships could sail across the sea. In both cases, it sailed from Norway to Canada in under a month.

At 23 metres long and 5 metres wide, manned by 32 rowers, its size was impressive. It demonstrated that tales about Viking dragon ships were not exaggerated. Since then, the remains of an even longer dragon ship have been found in Roskildefjorde, Denmark. This ship was over 30 metres in length and would have had sixty men manning its oars.

As big as these ships were, their hulls were only about two metres deep. This meant they could be rowed not only at sea but in lakes, fjords, rivers and even shallow creeks. They could be easily dragged up onto a beach like rowboats. There is even evidence that smaller ships were carried overland. This was how Swedish Vikings travelled from one waterway to another in Russia.

Such Viking vessels were built for raids and warfare. They are called longships because of their slender shape. Sometimes they are called dragon ships because the carved head of a mythical monster was occasionally mounted on the prow of the boat. It is remarkable that the timber for these ships was cut with only an axe. Unlike modern shipbuilding, the Vikings constructed the hull first and then cut and inserted the frame.

Source 1 A modern artist's depiction of the Gokstad ship, which was excavated from a burial mound in Norway in 1880



Source 2 A reproduction of a dragon ship carved on stone from Gotland, Sweden, in the eighth century CE



Did you know?



The longest Viking ship ever found, described in this spread, was sunk deliberately in Roskildefjorde along with other ships. It is believed this was an attempt to create a barrier against enemy ships trying to attack the harbour. Although it was sunk in Denmark, evidence suggests the boat was built in Dublin, Ireland.

Source 3 From the saga *Beowulf*, translated into modern English

Under the sea-girt cliffs the shining ship was readied, laded with coats of mail, swords and gleaming war harness. Bidding farewell to their king, the sturdy warriors embarked . . . [leaning] to the oars.

Like a bird, like a swallow, the glistening ship sped forward. She cut a path through the clear, green sea, her prow wreathed in bubbles and foam. Across unknown waters the light floater lunged and ploughed into the swells. The salt spray blew strong on the warriors' foreheads.

rudder broad wooden or metal piece at the end of a boat used for steering; on a longship, it was a broad oar attached to the tiller
tiller steering lever at the back of a boat

Source 4 The stern of the Oseberg ship on display in the Viking Ship Museum in Norway

Design and navigation

The prows of Viking ships were often elaborately decorated with figureheads representing dragons (see **Source 1**) or serpents (see **Sources 2 and 4**). However, the Oseberg ship, shown in **Source 4**, may not be a typical longship because it was found in the excavated burial site of a Norwegian Viking queen. If you look closely, you will see that its stern also features a finely carved pattern of smaller dragons and vines. Another important feature of the longship is that the woollen sails had patterns, as can be seen in **Source 2**. It is likely this criss-cross stitching had a practical purpose — it gave the sails the strength to withstand strong winds.

What is even more amazing is that Viking ships could cross vast seas without any of the navigation instruments used today. Vikings knew enough about the weather patterns to know when to put to sea, and they navigated by the positions of the stars and by the height of the sun above the horizon.

Activities



Student workbook
3.4

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 1 List the three most important developments in Viking shipbuilding in the eighth century.
- 2 What is the length of the longest Viking longship found so far? How many men manned its oars?
- 3 How did Swedish Vikings move their longships from one river to the next in Russia?
- 4 What does the stern of the Oseberg ship resemble?
- 5 Why did the Vikings criss-stitch their sails?
- 6 What was unusual about the way Viking ships were built?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- 7 Using **Source 3** as reference, describe your impression of the beginning of a voyage in a Viking longship. Be sure to mention what the Vikings brought on their journey, how the ship was powered and how it performed in the water.
- 8 Examine **Source 4**. Why do you think this ship was buried with a Viking queen, or noble woman, and her belongings?
- 9 Compare **Sources 2 and 4**. How did the discovery of the Oseberg ship demonstrate that the carving in **Source 2** is a fairly accurate representation of at least one type of Viking ship?

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

- 10 As a class, create the shape of the largest Viking ship found so far. It is 30 metres long and 3.2 metres wide. Do this outside using schoolbags. Students should sit in places where the rowers would have sat. One bag in the middle of the ship will represent the position of the mast. Don't forget to have someone controlling the **tiller**. Vikings and their ancestors used rocks in an exercise similar to this to begin creating their ships.

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

- 11 What would it have been like to sail in a longship?